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# Fiorello's: How an Italian boy from war-torn Europe created an authentic Italian restaurant in Belen (Part I)

*(La Historia del Rio Abajo is a regular column about Valencia County history written by members of the Valencia County Historical Society since 1998.*



Richard Melzer

*Opinions expressed in this and all columns of La Historia del Rio Abajo are the author's alone and not necessarily those of the Valencia County Historical Society or any other group or individual.*

Arlene Casale had never been to New Mexico when she landed at the Albuquerque Sunport and drove to Belen with her husband, Fiorello, in 1981. Arlene cried the whole way because she was convinced that Fiorello had taken her from her native New York City and dropped her in the middle of a far-off desert.

How could he have done such a thing?

Fast forward 39 years and Arlene and Fiorello are still in the middle of a "desert" but would never think of leaving it and moving back to New York or to any other place on earth.

In the intervening years they became New Mexicans, grew to love the Southwest and ran one of the most popular Italian restaurants in the entire state.

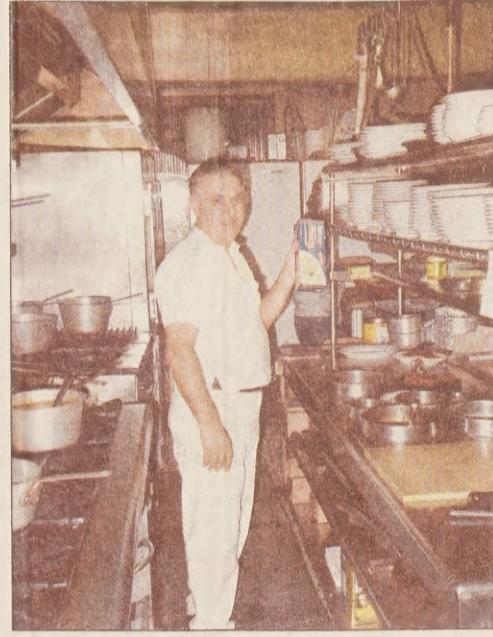
How did such a transformation take place? How did Fiorello Casale, an Italian immigrant who owned six enormously successful restaurants in New York, leave them all behind to start from scratch?

And how did Arlene Casale leave her family and the only city she had ever known? Theirs is an inspiring story, full of love and labor, with a few bumps and bruises experienced along the way.

## In Italy

Fiorello Casale's story began in Italy, where he was born on April 20, 1930. His father, Vincent, had migrated to the United States in 1912 when he was only 12, but had returned to Italy, married a young woman named Maria and began a family with one daughter and four sons, including Fiorello.

Fiorello's family traveled to New York, but he remained in his native Italy and worked from an early age. He was living in his village of Ventosa, southeast of Rome, at the start of World War II. Unable to join his family in the



Fiorello Casale in the kitchen of one of his New York restaurants.

United States, he faced years of horror under fascist rule.

German soldiers occupied the countryside, making extreme demands on local residents and finalizing plans to move many of them to concentration camps.

Fiorello and everyone in his village were overjoyed when American soldiers liberated Ventosa in May 1945. Fiorello never forgot the soldiers who came to his rescue and the soldiers never forgot the grateful people they encountered.

Two years after the war ended, Fiorello left Italy to join his family in New York City. Departing from Naples on a ship named the Marine Perch, he arrived in New York on June 21, 1947.

Fiorello was happy to see his family, but found New York City to be far too big and noisy for a boy who had been raised in rural Italy, even in the midst of World War II. Not able to sleep or relax in noisy Manhattan, Fiorello moved to a quieter part of New York called Flushing in the borough of Queens.

## From the Army in El Paso to Italian restaurants in New York

Drafted during the Korean conflict, Fiorello joined his two older brothers in the U.S. military. The Army sent Fiorello to Ft. Bliss, Texas, where he learned to cook and managed to avoid duty on the front lines of Korea. He had more than enough of combat conditions in Italy.

On his weekends off, Fiorello sometimes drove up the Rio Grande Valley to visit an appealing little town called Belen. He liked Belen because its smallness, friendly people and mild climate reminded him of his native village in Italy.

After two years in the military, the Army offered

Fiorello a promotion to the rank of sergeant if he re-enlisted. The young cook did not hesitate. He refused the offer and headed home to New York in 1953.

Back in Flushing, Fiorello taught his brothers how to cook and opened his first New York restaurant the year he returned from Texas. The business did so well that he opened a second restaurant, located in Forest Hills, N.Y., in 1955.

Fiorello's restaurants became famous for their full menus of Italian food, but especially for their pizzas. Customers came from near and far not only to eat Fiorello's excellent pizzas, but also to watch him make them. Dozens at a time stood outside to watch him through a window as he expertly threw the pizza dough high into the air.

Customers lined up to enter his restaurants through the dinner hour and far into the evening. Fiorello had so much business that he needed as much as 400 pounds of flour to make his pizzas by hand each day. He remembers making between 2,200 and 2,500 pizzas a week.

Along with his brothers, Fiorello owned as many as six New York restaurants at one time or another. In addition to cooking, Fiorello did the work of four men as he went from restaurant to restaurant.

Working as a trouble-shooter, he helped fix electricity, plumbing, and ovens. He helped remodel restaurants long into the night.

Many celebrities ate at the Casales' restaurants. The most famous included the singer Perry Como, the comedian Sid Caesar, the actor Robert Duvall and the New York Knicks basketball star Jerry Lucas.

Fiorello and his brothers were so successful that people continually urged



Arlene and Fiorello Casale with their children, Fiorello Jr. and Deborah, at their nephew's wedding in Garden City, N.Y.

Photos submitted by the Casale family



Fiorello Casale Sr., Arlene Casale and Fiorello Casale Jr., on the opening day of Fiorello's Italian Restaurant in 1984.

them to expand their business to locations beyond the New York area, including Washington, D.C. But the Casales resisted, knowing that expanding so far away could mean losing control of the product they had become famous for. They insisted on quality, not quantity.

## Courtship

Arlene Vertullo had been born in New York City in 1939. The grandchild of Italian grandparents who had immigrated to the United States in 1900, Arlene went to her grandparents' apartment every day after school. It was in her grandparents' home in Manhattan that she met a young immigrant that her family had befriended and encouraged

as he slowly adjusted to life in the U.S. The young man's name was Fiorello Casale.

Arlene got to know Fiorello better when she babysat for her aunt in Flushing and needed rides on Monday mornings so she could attend school in Manhattan. No one could say it was love at first sight. In fact, Arlene thought Fiorello was rather course and mean.

When he asked her out on a date to see a movie, she refused, saying that she had homework to do. Arlene's mother and aunt finally convinced her to go out with Fiorello because he didn't smoke, didn't drink and didn't womanize.

The couple dated, but Fiorello said he felt sorry for the man who would

marry her, and Arlene said she felt sorry for the woman who would marry him. She planned a life in medicine, not as a wife and mother. Somehow they changed their minds about each other. They were married in a big wedding with 300-400 guests on Jan. 8, 1956. Little did Arlene know what adventures lay ahead.

## Arriving in Belen

Fiorello and Arlene enjoyed their life together in New York. They had two children, Deborah, born in 1957; and Fiorello, Jr., (Fiore) born a year and a half later.

But problems arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The restaurant

See **Fiorello's**, Page 6B



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# Belen native's artwork featured on MS showcase

The Multiple Sclerosis Association of America has presented its 2020 MSAA Art Showcase — celebrating the work of artists affected by MS.

One of the artists, Leslie Pino Durant, a Belen native, submitted her artwork and was one of those selected from across the country.

Durant, who now lives in Jemez Springs with her husband, Rick, wrote in her bio:

"I rarely expressed myself as an artist for fear of being exposed as a not-so-great one. As an adult, I loved the arts through the eyes of my two children. I took them to musicals, plays, pottery classes, and encouraged them to love music, reading, writing, and performing.

"When I was diagnosed with MS, my life was difficult to manage. I didn't have a place to go to quiet my mind and body.

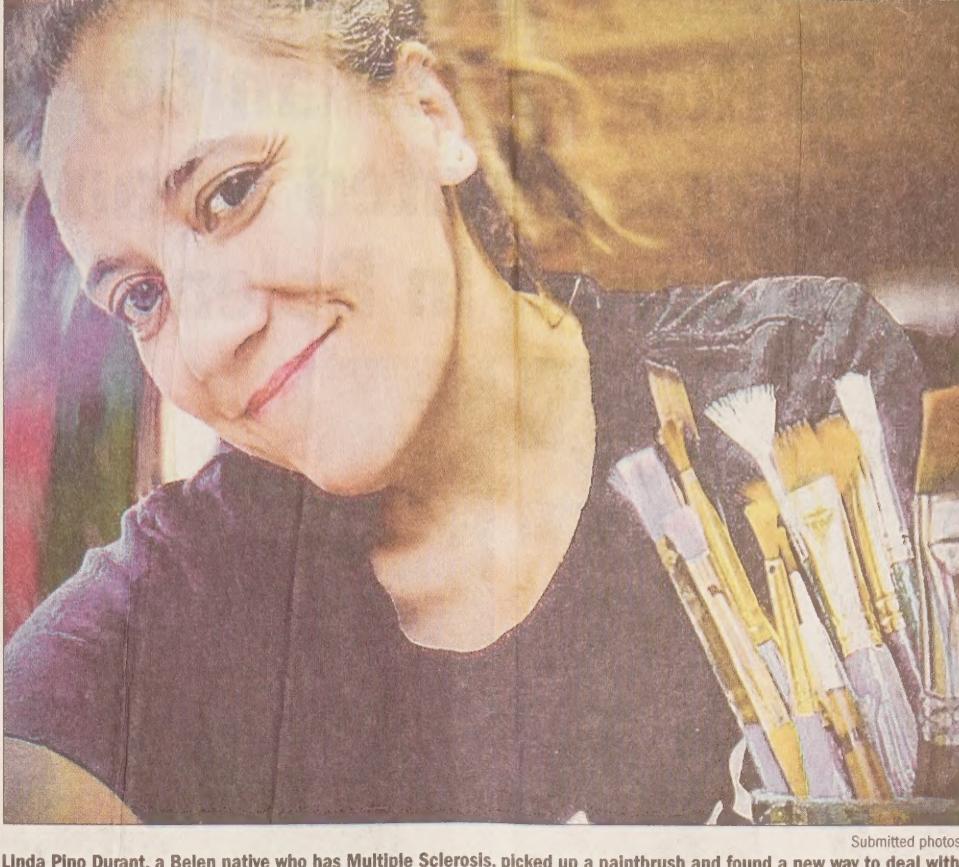
"Fast forward and my children are grown, I am retired, and I wanted to express my artistic need that I didn't feed earlier.

"I picked up an art journal and a paintbrush and with the help of online art teachers and lots of practice, I learned to paint.

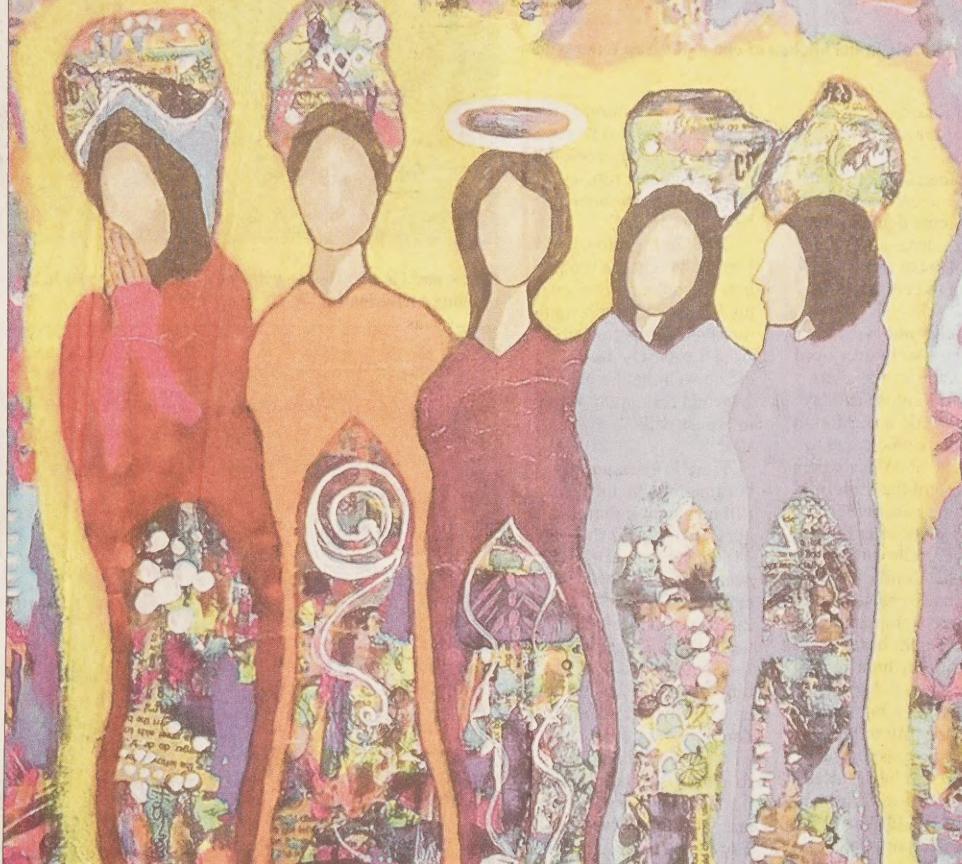
"I now have a place to go to that helps me get through fatigue, brain fog, and difficult days.

Most importantly, I am proud to finally call myself an artist."

Her work can be found at [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/lesliepinodurant.art) and [MSAA.org](https://www.msaa.org/artshowcase2020/entrants/leslie-pino-durant).



Linda Pino Durant, a Belen native who has Multiple Sclerosis, picked up a paintbrush and found a new way to deal with the disease.



Linda Pino Durant's painting, "Sisters" is one of many paintings that are on exhibit on the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America's Art Showcase, which celebrates the work of artists affected by MS.

## Days gone by

### 1970

#### Fifty years ago

Pvt. Lucy T. Garcia, 20, daughter of Mrs. Emma Garcia, completed eight weeks of basic training at the Woman's Army Crops Center in Ft. McClellan, Ala.

Army Spc. George F. Lucero, 20, son of Mr. and Mrs. Fred G. Lucero, was assigned as a helicopter mechanic with the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea.

St. Mary's School gave a hearty pat on the back to Nestor Gallegos for his efforts in securing \$586.59 for books for the school library.

At the recent New Mexico Music Educators District No. Six Solo and Ensemble Festival, Los Lunas band musicians won a total of 31 first division medals and 22 second division certificates.

### 1995

#### Twenty-five years ago

Officers of the Greater Belen chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons were Jackie Lewis, Rose Tierney, Lawrence Roy, Pat Willer and Dorothy Schipper.

Sandra Wright was named director of the Our Lady of Belen youth group.

Albert Jaramillo of Belen was chosen as an All-American Standout in basketball for his play on the team for the New Mexico School for the Deaf.

Christopher Church was the leader of the pack in the New Mexico Indoor Championships peewee division in motocycling.

The new Belen Board of Education was considering whether to put sixth-graders in middle school to ease overcrowding in elementary schools.

Damion Sullivan, termed "invincible," was wrestling state champ in his weight class; the Belen Eagles came in third in state.

### 2010

#### Ten years ago

New Mexico Tractor Sales, a Belen authorized dealer for John Deere Tractors, was presented with a Statement of Support for the guard and reserve by the New Mexico Employers Support for Guard and Reserve Committee.

Rudy Jaramillo was elected the mayor of Belen, beating Tibo Chavez Jr. by a vote count of 588 to 551.

Robert Vialpando was elected mayor of Los Lunas by garnering 1,122 votes, while opponents Frank Otero got 384 votes, and Gene Sais received 764 votes.

Edwin "Eddie" Benavidez, one of the founders of Eddie Benavidez Y Los Jesters, died at the age of 71.

David Yates, principal of School of Dreams Academy in Los Lunas, resigned from his position.

Ashley Lopez, an 8-year-old third-grader, and a Girl Scout with Troop 1399 in Belen, sold \$724 in sales for the Magnut Sales.

Brad Cosper of Los Lunas was inducted as a 4-H state diplomat during the annual 4-H Senior Leadership Retreat.

## Valencia County Church Directory

### ST. PHILIP'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH Welcomes You

Holy Communion Service Sunday 9:15am

113 La Luna Place

Rio Communities

505.864.7954

St.Philip's.Rio.Communities@gmail.com

Father Steve, Vicar

### First Presbyterian Church of Belen

Pastor Jayne L. Ruiz

85 Manzano Expressway

In Rio Communities

505.864.4560

Worship Service Sunday 10 am

Nursery for Service

Coffee hour follows

For full schedule visit:

[firstpresbelen.org](http://firstpresbelen.org)

Like our Facebook page

### CALVARY CHAPEL in granite valley

Sunday 8:30am/11am

Spanish Translation/Kid's Church

Deaf Interpretation

Wednesday 7pm

Spanish Translation/Kid's Church

Youth Group

Pastor Ray Jaramillo

19381 N. Hwy 314 • Belen

CCRGV.COM • 505.864.6611

### CHRISTIAN FAITH CHAPEL

1226 South Main Belen, NM 87002

505-463-5558

Pastor Rudy M. Espinoza

Church Services:

Sundays 10:00 am

Thursdays 7:00 pm

Children's Church & Nursery Provided

Bible Studies:

Men's Bible Study:

Wednesdays at 7:00am

Women's Bible Study:

Wednesdays at 8:00am

cfbelennm@gmail.com

### Abundant Life Christian Center

Pastor Barney Carbajal III

105 Avenida del Fuego

864-3743

Non-Denominational

Sundays:

English Service 10:00 am

Intercessory Prayer

9:30-10:00 am

Wednesday Midweek Service

6:45 pm

Nursery Provided

Free Downloadable MP3

Messages at [alctoday.org](http://alctoday.org)

### First United Methodist Church

Keath Baskett, Pastor

Home of Watch Me Grow Preschool

Murray Baskett, Director

Sunday

9:00 am Contemporary Praise Worship

10:15 am Adult Sunday School

11:00 am Traditional Worship

Children Sunday School or Nursery

(Available during Worship Times)

4:00 - 6:00 pm Youth Group

Please check website for other activities

[www.firststumbelen.org](http://www.firststumbelen.org)

### Valley Church of Christ

Times we meet:

Sunday - Bible Classes 9:30 am

Sunday Morning Worship 10:30 am

Ladies Monday Bible Class 10:00 am

505.389.3010

Preacher: Les Earwood 505.916.4601

[ValleyCofClosLunas@icloud.com](mailto:ValleyCofClosLunas@icloud.com)

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### FIRST BAPTIST BOSQUE FARMS

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Pastor Brian Mull

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Church, Ladies & Men's Bible

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**MASSIMO 500 2015**  
Side by Side 4x4 for Sale, Has a Dump Bed and an Electric Winch. It is in Excellent Condition and only has 457 miles. Ideal for Hunting, Ranch and Farm Use. Asking for \$4000, Call 575-835-3593 if interested.

**AUTOS**

**CHEVRLET 2018** Camaro, 2,200 mi, Conv, std trans., beautiful car, dark red, blk top, blk hood stripe, like new. \$32,000. 544-1275, 369-1211

**GOVT LEGALS**

Village Administrator  
Village of Los Lunas

Published in the Valencia County News-Bulletin on March 19, 2020.

**CITY OF BELEN,  
NEW MEXICO  
NOTICE OF PUBLIC  
HEARING AND INTENT  
TO ADOPT ORDINANCE**

Notice is hereby given of the title and of a general summary of the subject matter contained in an ordinance to be considered for adoption by the City Council of the City of Belen, New Mexico on Monday, April 6, 2020 at 6:00 p.m. at the Council Chambers, Belen City Hall, 100 S. Main Street, Belen, New Mexico 87002.

Published in the Valencia County News-Bulletin on March 19, 2020.

The title of the Ordinance is:

**AUTHORIZING THE EXECUTION AND DELIVERY OF A LOAN AGREEMENT BY AND BETWEEN THE CITY OF BELEN, NEW MEXICO (THE "GOVERNMENTAL UNIT") AND THE NEW MEXICO FINANCE AUTHORITY (THE "FINANCE AUTHORITY"), EVIDENCING A SPECIAL, LIMITED OBLIGATION OF THE GOVERNMENTAL UNIT TO PAY A PRINCIPAL AMOUNT OF UP TO \$6,462,500, TOGETHER WITH INTEREST THEREON, FOR THE PURPOSE OF FINANCING (1) CONSTRUCTING AND EQUIPPING A MAGISTRATE COURT FACILITY, (2) PAYING A LOAN PROCESSING FEE AND (3)**

**NON-GOV'T LEGALS****GOVT LEGALS****NON-GOV'T LEGALS**

payments in an amount sufficient to pay debt service on the Loan Agreement described above; AOC is responsible for janitorial, utility and maintenance costs; the term of the Lease Agreement is 30 years with an option by AOC to extend the term for two additional ten year periods. The appraised value of the property after completion of the court facility is \$5,400,000. Complete copies of the ordinance are on file in the Office of the City Clerk and are available for inspection and/or purchase during regular office hours. This notice constitutes compliance with Sections 3-17-3 and 3-54-1, NMSA 1978.

Published in the Valencia County News-Bulletin on March 19, 2020.

**NON-GOV'T LEGALS**

Master will on April 17, 2020 at 10:30 AM, outside the front entrance of the 13th Judicial District Courthouse, 1835 Highway 314, City of Los Lunas, County of Valencia, State of New Mexico, sell and convey to the highest bidder for cash all the right, title, and interest of the above-named defendants in and to the following described real estate located in said County and State:

Lot Twelve (12), in Block "A", of CARSON PARK UNIT 2, a subdivision in Valencia County, New Mexico, as the same is shown and designated on the plat thereof filed in the office of the County Clerk of Valencia County, New Mexico on the 14th day of July, 1987, recorded in Plat Cabinet F, at page 98, records of said county and state.

At the date and time stated above, the Special Master may postpone the sale to such later date and time as the Special Master may specify.

The address of the real property is 1052 Vasquez Court S.E., Los Lunas, NM 87031.

Plaintiff does not represent or warrant that the stated street address is the street address of the described property; if the street address does not match the legal description, then the property being sold herein is the property more particularly described above, not the property located at the street address; any prospective purchaser at the sale is given notice that it should verify the location and address of the property being sold. Said sale will be made pursuant to the judgment entered on February 28, 2020 in the above entitled and numbered cause, which was a suit to foreclose a mortgage held by the above Plaintiff and wherein Plaintiff was adjudged to have a lien against the above-described real estate in the sum of \$421,240.94 plus interest from September 25, 2019 to the date of sale at the rate of 4.000% per annum, the costs of sale, including the Special Master's fee, publication costs, and Plaintiff's costs expended for taxes, insurance, and keeping the property in good repair. Plaintiff has the right to bid at such sale and submit its bid verbally or in writing. The Plaintiff may apply all or any part of its judgment to the purchase price in lieu of cash.

Published in the Valencia County News-Bulletin on March 19, 2020.

**NON-GOV'T LEGALS**

ing described real estate located in said County and State:

Lot numbered Two Hundred Twenty-Six (226) of CYPRESS GARDENS, a subdivision in Valencia County, New Mexico, as the same is shown and designated on the plat of the above said subdivision, filed in the office of the County Clerk of Valencia County, New Mexico on the 14th day of July, 1987, recorded in Plat Cabinet F, at page 98, records of said county and state.

The address of the real property is 10 Sparling Court, Los Lunas, NM 87031. Plaintiff does not represent or warrant that the stated street address is the street address of the described property; if the street address does not match the legal description, then the property being sold herein is the property more particularly described above, not the property located at the street address; any prospective purchaser at the sale is given notice that it should verify the location and address of the property being sold. Said sale will be made pursuant to the judgment entered on February 28, 2020 in the above entitled and numbered cause, which was a suit to foreclose a mortgage held by the above Plaintiff and wherein Plaintiff was adjudged to have a lien against the above-described real estate in the sum of \$421,240.94 plus interest from September 25, 2019 to the date of sale at the rate of 4.000% per annum, the costs of sale, including the Special Master's fee, publication

**NON-GOV'T LEGALS**

THIRTEENTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT  
COUNTY OF VALENCIA  
STATE OF NEW MEXICO

No. D-1314-PB-2019-00063

In the Matter of the Estate of CARLOS BACA, Deceased.

**NOTICE TO CREDITORS**

KENNETH BACA has been appointed Personal Representative of the Estate of CARLOS BACA, deceased. All persons having claims against this Estate are required to present their claims within four months after the date of the first publication of this Notice or the claims will be forever barred. Claims must be presented either to the Personal Representative at the office of Douglas W. Fowles, 101 West Aztec, Suite A, P. O. Box 1027, Gallup, New Mexico 87305, attorney for the Personal Representative, or filed with the District Court of Valencia County, New Mexico.

Dated: February 26, 2020

s/ Kenneth Baca  
**KENNETH BACA**  
Personal Representative

s/ Douglas W. Fowles  
Douglas W. Fowles  
Rosebrough & Fowles, P.C.  
Attorney for Personal  
Representative  
101 West Aztec, Suite A  
P.O. Box 1027  
Gallup, New Mexico 87305  
(505) 722-9121

Under Application No. SD-0936 into RG-93445, the ap-

**NON-GOV'T LEGALS**

Rio Grande Basin of the State of New Mexico.

Bernalillo and Valencia Counties are the Counties affected by the diversion and in which the water has been or will be put to beneficial use. This notice is ordered to be published in the Albuquerque Journal and the Valencia County News Bulletin.

Under Application No. SD-07548 into RG-93445, the applicants propose to discontinue the farm delivery requirement of 7,1655 acre-feet of surface water per annum (AFA), inclusive of a consumptive irrigation requirement of 5.0158 AFA from the Los Chavez Acequia, with a point of diversion on the Rio Grande at the Isleta Diversion Dam located at a point where X=346, 037 meters, Y=3,863,880 meters, UTM Zone 13N, NAD83, on land owned by the MRGCD, for the irrigation of 2.3885 acres of land owned by Estella Teran, described as Tract 47, MRGCD Map 86, further described as being located in Section 17, Township 6 North, Range 2 East, NMPM, Valencia County, New Mexico. The move-form, land is generally located east of I-25 approximately 4.3 miles south of the intersection between NM-314W/Hwy 314 SW and Main St SW and 779.86 feet north of NM-314W/Hwy SW and Peyton Road, Los Lunas, New Mexico.

# Fiorello's: Family settled in Rio Communities; still calls Valencia County home

from PAGE 1B

business in New York suffered in what Fiorello calls the "Carter Misery" or economic trouble during Jimmy Carter's term as president. More personally, Fiorello's health began to suffer after years of over-work. He grew so ill that he could hardly walk.

Searching for a place to recover his health, Fiorello remembered the small town on the Rio Grande that he had liked so much while he was stationed at Fort Bliss. He had even bought some land east of Belen when a land salesman from the Horizon Corporation visited him in New York and convinced him that buying land in New Mexico was a wise investment.

Like thousands of Easterners, Fiorello bought his land sight-unseen. Only a few Easterners ever profited from their purchases and even fewer ever

moved to the new community, now known as Rio Communities.

Despite Arlene's first reaction when she arrived in New Mexico, the couple decided to settle in Rio Communities in 1981.

Although the Casales had decided to move to New Mexico, their friends and relatives in New York didn't believe they would be gone for long. Many didn't even know where New Mexico was; they were sure the Casales had moved to Mexico and shouldn't drink the water. Many made bets about how long it would take for the family to return back East.

## Opening Fiorello's

Whoever bet that the Casales would not stay in New Mexico lost a lot of money. The family grew to like everything about their

new home, especially the people they met.

Fiorello's first reaction when she arrived in New Mexico, the couple decided to settle in Rio Communities in 1981.

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As soon as Fiorello's health improved, he and Arlene began to look for a possible location for the Italian restaurant they hoped to open. They found the right place, a house at 921 E. River Road on the west side of the Rio Grande about half way between Rio Communities (with its largely Eastern transplants) and Belen (with its largely local population).

The house had been built by Gordon and

Hannah McConnell. Gordon, a Santa Fe railroad conductor, had married Hannah, a Harvey Girl at the Belen Harvey House in 1937. They moved into their new house in 1950 and raised five children before deciding to sell their home and retire to Elephant Butte.

The McConnell's house had equaled less than a 1,000 feet. Using the remodeling, plumbing and electrical skills that Fiorello had learned in his New York restaurants, the Casales expanded the house to 3,500 sq. ft. and converted it into a restaurant that sat 150 customers at a time.

Arlene designed the interior, using gold leaf on the restaurant's doors where she could welcome her many customers.

Fiorello purchased the best modern equipment

for his new kitchen operation. He even imported a machine from Italy to make pasta. He ordered all fresh food from Nobels in Albuquerque, and he brought all his best recipes from his years in New York.

Arlene says people wanted to x-ray Fiorello's brain to learn all the recipes he stored in his mind.

Known as Fiorello's, the Casale family's restaurant opened in September 1984. Their four-page menu offered authentic, homemade fresh pasta, sauce, garlic bread, eggplant parmesan, lasagna, ravioli, fish and spinach pizza, their specialty. Ten-foot long submarine sandwiches were available for catered events.

Fiorello and Arlene did the cooking while Arlene greeted their customers and ran the dining room, mak-

ing her own special green chile bruschetta (appetizer).

Using a special talent, Arlene remembered everyone by name. When a memory expert named Harry Lorane wrote a book, "Remembering People: The Key to Success," he included Arlene as an example of a person whose success was largely based on her ability to remember her customers' names.

Knowing how to work hard from their earliest days in New York, Fiorello and Arlene worked seven days a week. They still consider their years in their restaurant the best memories of their lives.

(Part 2 of "Fiorello's" will appear in the April 16 edition of the News-Bulletin, just in time to help celebrate Fiorello's 90th birthday on April 20.)

BHHC-2-2-28

Froehle's

